**Summary of the CARS Checklist**

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| **Credibility** | trustworthy source, author’s and experts’ credentials, evidence of quality control, known or respected authority, organizational support.  Goal: an authoritative source, a source that supplies some good evidence that allows you to trust it. |
| **Accuracy** | up to date, factual, detailed, exact, comprehensive, audience and purpose reflect intentions of completeness and accuracy.  Goal: a source that is correct today (not yesterday), a source that gives the whole truth. |
| **Reasonableness** | fair, balanced, objective, reasoned, no conflict of interest, absence of fallacies or slanted tone.  Goal: a source that engages the subject thoughtfully and reasonably, concerned with the truth. |
| **Support** | listed sources, contact information, available corroboration, claims supported, documentation supplied.  Goal: a source that provides convincing evidence for the claims made |

**Credibility**

Because people have always made important decisions based on information, evidence of authenticity and reliability--or credibility, believability--has always been important. If you read an article saying that the area where you live will experience a major earthquake in the next six months, it is important that you should know whether or not to believe the information. Some questions you might ask would include, What about this source makes it believable (or not)? How does this source know this information? Why should I believe this source over another? As you can see, the key to credibility is the question of trust.

There are several tests you can apply to a source to help you judge how credible and useful it will be:

**Author's/Experts’ Credentials**

The author or source of the information should show some evidence of being knowledgeable, reliable, and truthful. Here are some clues:

* Author's education, training, and/or experience in a field relevant to the information. Look for biographical information, the author's title or position of employment
* Author provides contact information (email or snail mail address, phone number)
* Organizational authorship from a known and respected organization (corporate, governmental, or non-profit)

**Evidence of Quality Control**

Statements issued in the name of an organization have almost always been seen and approved by several people. (But note the difference between, "Allan Thornton, employee of the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Agency, says that a new ice age is near," and "The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Agency said today that a new ice age is near." The employee is speaking for himself, whereas a statement in the name of NOAA represents the official position of NOAA.)

Evidence of quality control of Internet material includes these items:

* Information presented on organizational web sites
* Postings of information taken from books or journals that have a quality control process

**Indicators of Lack of Credibility**

You can sometimes tell by the tone, style, or competence of the writing whether or not the information is suspect. Here are a few clues:

* Anonymity
* Bad grammar or misspelled words. Most educated people use grammar fairly well and check their work for spelling errors. Whether the errors come from carelessness or ignorance, neither puts the information or the writer in a favorable light.

**Accuracy**

The goal of the accuracy test is to assure that the information is actually correct: up to date, factual, detailed, exact, and comprehensive. For example, even though a very credible writer said something that was correct twenty years ago, it may not be correct today. Similarly, a reputable source might be giving up-to-date information, but the information may be only partial and not give the full story. Here are some concepts related to accuracy:

**Timeliness**

Some work is timeless, like the classic novels and stories, or like the thought provoking philosophical work of Aristotle and Plato. Other work has a limited useful life because of advances in the discipline (psychological theory, for example), and some work is outdated very quickly (such as technology news). You must therefore be careful to note when the information you find was created, and then decide whether it is still of value (and how much value).

**Comprehensiveness**

Any source that presents conclusions or that claims to give a full and rounded story, should reflect the intentions of completeness and accuracy. In other words, the information should be comprehensive. And no single piece of information will offer the truly complete story--that's why we rely on more than one source. On the other hand, an information source that deliberately leaves out important facts, qualifications, consequences, or alternatives may be misleading or even intentionally deceptive.

**Audience and Purpose**

For whom is this source intended and for what purpose? If, for example, you find an article, "How Plants Grow," and children are the intended audience, then the material may be too simplified for your college botany paper. More important to the evaluation of information is the purpose for which the information was created. For example, an article titled, "Should You Buy or Lease a Car?" might have been written with the purpose of being an objective analysis, but it may instead have been written with the intention of persuading you that leasing a car is better than buying. In the latter case, the information will most likely be biased or distorted. Such information is not useless, but the **bias** must be taken into consideration when interpreting and using the information. *Information pretending to objectivity but possessing a hidden agenda of persuasion or a hidden bias is among the most common kind of information in our culture.*

**Indicators of a Lack of Accuracy**

In addition to an obvious tone or style that reveals a carelessness with detail or accuracy, there are several indicators that may mean the source is inaccurate, either in whole or in part:

* No date on the document
* Vague or sweeping generalizations
* Old date on information known to change rapidly
* Very one sided view that does not acknowledge opposing views or respond to them

Reasonableness

The test of reasonableness involves examining the information for fairness, objectivity, moderateness, and consistency.

**Fairness**

Fairness includes offering a balanced, reasoned argument, not slanted. Even ideas or claims made by the source's opponents should be presented in an accurate manner. A good information source will also possess a calm, reasoned tone, arguing or presenting material thoughtfully and without attempting to get you emotionally worked up. Pay attention to the tone and be cautious of highly emotional writing.

**Objectivity**

There is no such thing as pure objectivity, but a good writer should be able to control his or her biases. One of the biggest hindrances to objectivity is conflict of interest. Sometimes an information source will benefit in some way (usually financially) if that source can get you to accept certain information rather than the objective truth.

**Moderateness**

Moderateness is a test of the information against how the world really is. Use your knowledge and experience to ask if the information is really likely, possible, or probable. Most truths are ordinary. If a claim being made is surprising, use caution and demand more evidence than you might require for a lesser claim. Is the information believable? Does it make sense? Or do the claims lack face validity? That is, do they seem to conflict with what you already know in your experience, or do they seem too exaggerated to be true?

**Consistency**

The consistency test simply requires that the argument or information does not contradict itself. Sometimes when people spin falsehoods or distort the truth, inconsistencies or even contradictions show up. These are evidence of unreasonableness.

**Indicators of a Lack of Reasonableness**

Writers who put themselves in the way of the argument, either emotionally or because of self interest, often reveal their lack of reasonableness. If, for example, you find a writer reviewing a book he opposes by asserting that "the entire book is completely worthless claptrap," you might suspect there is more than a reasoned disagreement at work. Here are some clues to a lack of reasonableness:

* Intemperate tone or language ("stupid jerks," "shrill cries of my extremist opponents")
* Overclaims ("Thousands of children are murdered every day in the United States.")
* Sweeping statements of excessive significance ("This is the most important idea ever conceived!")
* Conflict of Interest ("Welcome to the Old Stogie Tobacco Company Home Page. To read our report, 'Cigarettes Make You Live Longer,' click here." or "The products our competitors make are dangerous and bad for your health.")

**Support**

The area of support is concerned with the source and corroboration of the information. Much information, especially statistics and claims of fact, comes from other sources. Citing sources strengthens the credibility of the information.

**Source Documentation or Bibliography**

Where did this information come from? What sources did the information creator use? Are the sources listed? Is there a bibliography or other documentation? Does the author provide contact information in case you wish to discuss an issue or request further clarification? What kind of support for the information is given? How does the writer know this? It is especially important for statistics to be documented. Otherwise, someone may be just making up numbers.

**Corroboration**

See if other sources support this source. Corroboration or confirmability is an important test of truth. And even in areas of judgment or opinion, if an argument is sound, there will probably be a number of people who adhere to it or who are in some general agreement with parts of it. What you are doing with corroboration is using information to test information. Use one source, fact, point of view, or interpretation to test another. Find other information to support and reconfirm (or to challenge or rebut) information you have found.

**External Consistency**

The test of external consistency asks, Where this source discusses facts or ideas I already know something about, does the source agree or harmonize or does it conflict, exaggerate, or distort? The reasoning is that if a source is faulty where it discusses something you already know, it is likely to be faulty in areas where you do not yet know, and you should therefore be cautious and skeptical about trusting it.

**Indicators of a Lack of Support**

As you can readily guess, the lack of supporting evidence provides the best indication that there is indeed no available support. Be careful, then, when a source shows problems like these:

* Numbers or statistics presented without an identified source for them
* Absence of source documentation when the discussion clearly needs such documentation
* You cannot find any other sources that present the same information or acknowledge that the same information exists (lack of corroboration)